

Characters

- MOTHER, early 50's
- SON, 30 years old
- THE GIRL
- THE BOY

Act

The BOY and the GIRL wear black tights and shirts. They move the action of the play and express the MOTHER's and the SON's moods and tensions. They become various embodiments recalled from memory and history: they enact a number of personalities and move from mood to mood.

The players are Black.

At rise: Scene: Bare stage but for two chairs positioned so as not to interfere with the actions of the BOY and the GIRL.

The MOTHER enters, sits in chair and begins to use imaginary iron and board. She hums a spiritual as she works.

MOTHER

You came three times . . . Michael? It took you three times to find me at home?

(The GIRL enters, turns and peers through the cracked, imaginary door)

SON'S VOICE

(Offstage)

Is Mrs` Brown home?

GIRL

(An old woman)

What?

MOTHER

It shouldn't have taken you three times. I told you that I would be here by two and you should wait, Michael.

(The SON enters, passes the GIRL and takes his seat upon the other chair.

The BOY enters, stops on other side of the imaginary door and looks through at the GIRL)

BOY

Is Mrs` Brown in?

GIRL

Miss Brown ain't come in yet. Come back later . . . She'll be in before dark.

MOTHER

It shouldn't have taken you three times . . . You should listen to me, Michael. Standin' all that time in the cold.

SON

It wasn't cold, Mother.

MOTHER

I told you that I would be here by two and you should wait, Michael.

BOY

Please tell Mrs' Brown that her son's in town to visit her.

GIRL

You little Miss Brown's son? Well, bless the Lord.

(Calls over her shoulder)

Hey, Mandy, do you hear that? Little Miss Brown upstairs got a son . . . a great big boy . . . He's come to visit her.

BOY

You'll tell her, won't you?

GIRL

Sure, I'll tell her.

(Grins and shows gums)

I'll tell her soon as she gets in.

MOTHER

Did you get cold, Michael?

SON

No, Mother. I walked around some . . . sightseeing.

BOY

I walked up Twenty-third Street toward South. I had phoned that I was coming.

MOTHER

Sightseeing? But this is your home, Michael . . . always has been.

BOY

Just before I left New York I phoned that I was taking the bus. Two hours by bus, that's all. That's all it takes. Two hours.

SON

This town seems so strange. Different than how I remember it.

MOTHER

Yes, you have been away for a good while . . . How long has it been, Michael?

BOY

Two hours down the Jersey Turnpike, the trip beginning at the New York Port Authority Terminal . . .

SON

. . . and then straight down through New Jersey to Philadelphia . . .

GIRL

. . . and home . . . Just imagine . . . little Miss Brown's got a son who's come home.

SON

Yes, home . . . an anachronism.

MOTHER

What did you say, Michael?

BOY

He said . . .

GIRL

(Late teens)

What's an anachronism, Mike?

SON

Anachronism: 1: an error in chronology; *esp*: a chronological misplacing of persons, events, objects, or customs in regard to each other 2: a person or a thing that is chronologically out of place — anachronistic/ *also* anachronic/ *or* anachronous — anachronistically/ *also* anachronously.

MOTHER

I was so glad to hear you were going to school in California.

BOY

College.

GIRL

Yes, I understand.

MOTHER

How long have you been gone, Michael?

SON

Nine years.

BOY

Nine years it's been. I wonder if she'll know me . . .

MOTHER

You've put on so much weight, son. You know that's not healthy.

GIRL

(20 years old)

And that silly beard . . . how . . .

SON

Oh . . . I'll take it off. I'm going on a diet tomorrow.

BOY

I wonder if I'll know her.

SON

You've put on some yourself, Mother.

MOTHER

Yes, the years pass. Thank the Lord.

BOY

I wonder if we've changed much.

GIRL

Yes, thank the Lord.

SON

The streets here seem so small.

MOTHER

Yes, it seems like that when you spend a little time in Los Angeles.

GIRL

I spent eighteen months there with your aunt when she was sick. She had nobody else to help her . . . she was so lonely. And you were in the service . . . away. You've always been away.

BOY

In Los Angeles the boulevards, the avenues, the streets . . .

SON

. . . are wide. Yes, they have some wide ones out West. Here, they're so small and narrow. I wonder how cars get through on both sides.

MOTHER

Why, you know how . . . we lived on Derby Street for over ten years, didn't we?

SON

Yeah, that was almost an alley.

MOTHER

Did you see much of your aunt before you left Los Angeles?

SON

What?

GIRL

(Middle-aged woman) (To BOY)

Have you found a job yet, Michael?

MOTHER

Your aunt. My sister.

BOY

Nawh, not yet . . . Today I just walked downtown . . . quite a ways . . . this place is plenty big, ain't it?

SON

I don't see too much of Aunt Sophie.

MOTHER

But you're so much alike.

GIRL

Well, your bags are packed and are sitting outside the door.

BOY

My bags?

MOTHER

You shouldn't be that way, Michael. You shouldn't get too far away from your family.

SON

Yes, Mother.

BOY

But I don't have any money. I had to walk downtown today. That's how much money I have. I've only been here a week.

GIRL

I packed your bags, Michael.

MOTHER

You never can tell when you'll need or want your family, Michael.

SON

That's right, Mother.

MOTHER

You and she are so much alike.

BOY

Well, goodbye, Aunt Sophie.

GIRL

(Silence)

MOTHER

All that time in California and you hardly saw your aunt. My baby sister.

BOY

Tsk tsk tsk.

SON

I'm sorry, Mother.

MOTHER

In the letters I'd get from both of you there'd be no mention of the other. All these years. Did you see her again?

SON

Yes.

GIRL

(On telephone)

Michael? Michael who? . . . Ohhh . . . Bernice's boy.

MOTHER

You didn't tell me about this, did you?

SON

No, I didn't.

BOY

Hello, Aunt Sophie. How are you?

GIRL

I'm fine, Michael. How are you? You're looking well.

BOY

I'm getting on okay.

MOTHER

I prayed for you.

SON

Thank you.

MOTHER

Thank the Lord, Michael.

BOY

Got me a job working for the city.

GIRL

You did now.

BOY

Yes, I've brought you something.

GIRL

What's this, Michael . . . ohhh . . . it's money.

BOY

It's for the week I stayed with you.

GIRL

Fifty dollars. But, Michael, you didn't have to.

MOTHER

Are you still writing that radical stuff, Michael?

SON

Radical?

MOTHER

Yes . . . that stuff you write and send me all the time in those little books.

SON

My poetry, Mother?

MOTHER

Yes, that's what I'm talking about.

SON

No.

MOTHER

Praise the Lord, son. Praise the Lord. Didn't seem like anything I had read in school.

BOY

(On telephone)

Aunt Sophie? . . . Aunt Sophie? . . . It's me, Michael . . .

GIRL

Michael?

BOY

Yes . . . Michael . . .

GIRL

Oh . . . Michael . . . yes . . .

BOY

I'm in jail, Aunt Sophie . . . I got picked up for drunk driving.

GIRL

You did . . . how awful . . .

MOTHER

When you going to get your hair cut, Michael?

BOY

Aunt Sophie . . . will you please come down and sign my bail. I've got the money . . . I just got paid yesterday . . . They're holding more than enough for me . . . but the law says that someone has to sign for it.

MOTHER

You look almost like a hoodlum, Michael.

BOY

All you need to do is come down and sign . . . and I can get out.

MOTHER

What you tryin' to be . . . a savage or something? Are you keeping out of trouble, Michael?

GIRL

Ohhh . . . Michael . . . I'm sorry but I can't do nothin' like that . . .

BOY

But all you have to do is sign . . . I've got the money and everything.

GIRL

I'm sorry . . . I can't stick my neck out.

BOY

But, Aunt Sophie . . . if I don't get back to work I'll lose my job and everything . . . please . . .

GIRL

I'm sorry, Michael . . . I can't stick my neck out . . . I have to go now . . . Is there anyone I can call?

BOY

No.

GIRL

I could call your mother. She wouldn't mind if I reversed the charges on her, would she? I don't like to run my bills up.

BOY

No, thanks.

MOTHER

You and your aunt are so much alike.

SON

Yes, Mother. Our birthdays are in the same month.

MOTHER

Yes, that year was so hot . . . so hot and I was carrying you . . .

(As the MOTHER speaks the BOY comes over and takes her by the hand and leads her from the chair, and they stroll around the stage, arm in arm.)

The GIRL accompanies them and she and the BOY enact scenes from the MOTHER' s mind)

. . . carrying you, Michael . . . and you were such a big baby . . . kicked all the time. But I was happy. Happy that I was having a baby of my own . . . I worked as long as I could and bought you everything you might need . . . diapers . . . and bottles . . . and your own spoon . . . and even toys . . . and even books . . . And it was so hot in Philadelphia that year . . . Your Aunt Sophie used to come over and we'd go for

walks . . . sometimes up on the avenue . . . I was living in West Philly then . . . in that old terrible section they called "The Bottom." That's where I met your father.

GIRL

You're such a fool, Bernice. No nigger . . . man or boy's . . . ever going to do a thing to me like that.

MOTHER

Everything's going to be all right, Sophia.

GIRL

But what is he going to do? How are you going to take care of a baby by yourself?

MOTHER

Everything's going to be all right, Sophia. I'll manage.

GIRL

You'll manage? How? Have you talked about marriage?

MOTHER

Oh, please, Sophia!

GIRL

What do you mean "please"? Have you?

MOTHER

I just can't. He might think . . .

GIRL

Think! That dirty nigger better think. He better think before he really messes up. And you better too. You got this baby comin' on. What are you going to do?

MOTHER

I don't know . . . I don't know what I can do.

GIRL

Is he still tellin' you those lies about . . .

MOTHER

They're not lies.

GIRL

Haaaa . . .

MOTHER

They're not.

GIRL

Some smooth-talkin' nigger comes up from Georgia and tell you he escaped from the chain gang and had to change his name so he can't get married 'cause they might find out . . . What kinda shit is that, Bernice?

MOTHER

Please, Sophia. Try and understand. He loves me. I I can't hurt him.

GIRL

Loves you . . . and puts you through this?

MOTHER

Please . . . I'll talk to him . . . Give me a chance.

GIRL

It's just a good thing you got a family, Bernice. It's just a good thing. You know that, don't cha?

MOTHER

Yes . . . yes, I do . . . but please don't say anything to him.

SON

I've only seen my father about a half dozen times that I remember, Mother. What was he like?

MOTHER

Down in The Bottom . . . that's where I met your father. I was young and hinky then. Had big pretty brown legs and a small waist. Everybody used to call me Bernie . . . and me and my sister would go to Atlantic City on the weekends and work as waitresses in the evenings and sit all afternoon on the black part of the beach at Boardwalk and Atlantic . . . getting blacker . . . and having the times of our lives. Your

father probably still lives down in The Bottom . . . perched over some bar down there . . . drunk to the world . . . I can see him now . . . He had good white teeth then . . . not how they turned later when he started in drinkin' that wine and wouldn't stop . . . he was so nice then.

BOY

Awwww, listen, kid. I got my problems too.

GIRL

But Andy . . . I'm six months gone . . . and you ain't done nothin'.

BOY

Well, what can I do?

GIRL

Don't talk like that . . . What can you do? . . . You know what you can do.

BOY

You mean marry you? Now lissen, sweetheart . . .

GIRL

But what about our baby?

BOY

Your baby.

GIRL

Don't talk like that! It took more than me to get him.

BOY

Well . . . look . . . I'll talk to you later, kid. I got to go to work now.

GIRL

That's what I got to talk to you about too, Andy. I need some money.

BOY

Money! Is somethin' wrong with your head, woman? I ain't got no money.

GIRL

But I can't work much longer, Andy. You got to give me some money. Andy . . . you just gotta.

BOY

Woman . . . all I got to *ever* do is die and go to hell.

GIRL

Well, you gonna do that, Andy. You sho are . . . you know that, don't you? . . . You know that.

MOTHER

. . . Yes, you are, man. Praise the Lord. We all are . . . All of us . . . even though he ain't come for you yet to make you pay. Maybe he's waitin' for us to go together so I can be a witness to the retribution that's handed down. A witness to all that He'll bestow upon your sinner's head . . . A witness! . . . That's what I am, Andy! Do you hear me? . . . A witness!

SON

Mother . . . what's wrong? What's the matter?

MOTHER

Thank the Lord that I am not blinded and will see the fulfillment of divine . . .

SON

Mother!

MOTHER

Oh . . . is something wrong, Michael?

SON

You're shouting and walking around . . .

MOTHER

Oh . . . it's nothing, son. I'm just feeling the power of the Lord.

SON

Oh . . . is there anything I can get you, Mother?

MOTHER

No, nothing at all.

(She sits again and irons)

SON

Where's your kitchen? . . . I'll get you some coffee . . . the way you like it. I bet I still remember how to fix it.

MOTHER

Michael . . . I don't drink anything like that no more.

SON

No?

MOTHER

Not since I joined the service of the Lord.

SON

Yeah? . . . Well, do you mind if I get myself a cup?

MOTHER

Why, I don't have a kitchen. All my meals are prepared for me.

SON

Oh . . . I thought I was having dinner with you.

MOTHER

No. There's nothing like that here.

SON

Well, could I take you out to a restaurant? . . . Remember how we used to go out all the time and eat? I've never lost my habit of liking to eat out. Remember . . . we used to come down to this part of town and go to restaurants. They used to call it home cooking then . . . now, at least where I been out West and up in Harlem . . . we call it soul food. I bet we could find a nice little restaurant not four blocks from here, Mother. Remember that old man's place we used to go to on Nineteenth and South? I bet he's dead now . . . but . . .

MOTHER

I don't even eat out no more, Michael.

SON

No?

MOTHER

Sometimes I take a piece of holy bread to work . . . or some fruit . . . if it's been blessed by my Spiritual Mother.

SON

I see.

MOTHER

Besides . . . we have a prayer meeting tonight.

SON

On Friday?

MOTHER

Every night. You'll have to be going soon.

SON

Oh.

MOTHER

You're looking well.

SON

Thank you.

MOTHER

But you look tired.

SON

Do I?

MOTHER

Yes, those rings around your eyes might never leave. Your father had them.

SON

Did he?

MOTHER

Yes . . . and cowlicks . . . deep cowlicks on each side of his head.

SON

Yes . . . I remember.

MOTHER

Do you?

(The BOY and the GIRL take crouching positions behind and in front of them. They are in a streetcar. The BOY behind the MOTHER and SON, the GIRL across the aisle, a passenger)

MOTHER

(Young woman) (To the BOY)

Keep your damn hands off him, Andy!

BOY

(Chuckles)

Awww, c'mon . . . Bernie. I ain't seen him since he was in the crib.

MOTHER

And you wouldn't have seen neither of us . . . if I had anything to do with it . . . Ohhh . . . why did I get on this trolley?

BOY

C'mon . . . Bernie . . . don't be so stuckup.

MOTHER

Don't even talk to us . . . and stop reaching after him.

BOY

Awww . . . c'mon . . . Bernie. Let me look at him.

MOTHER

Leave us alone. Look . . . people are looking at us.

(The GIRL across the aisle has been peeking at the trio but looks toward front at the mention of herself)

BOY

Hey, big boy . . . do you know who I am?

MOTHER

Stop it, Andy! Stop it, I say . . . Mikie . . . don't pay any attention to him . . . you hear?

BOY

Hey, big boy . . . know who I am? . . . I'm your daddy. Hey, there . . .

MOTHER

Shut up . . . shut up, Andy . . . you nothin' to us.

BOY

Where you livin' at . . . Bernie? Let me come on by and see the little guy, huh?

MOTHER

No! You're not comin' near us . . . ever . . . you hear?

BOY

But I'm his father . . . look . . . Bernie . . . I've been an ass the way I've acted but . . .

MOTHER

He ain't got no father.

BOY

Oh, come off that nonsense, woman.

MOTHER

Mikie ain't got no father . . . his father's dead . . . you hear?

BOY

Dead?

MOTHER

Yes, dead. My son's father's dead.

BOY

What you talkin' about? . . . He's the spittin' image of me.

MOTHER

Go away . . . leave us alone, Andrew.

BOY

See there . . . he's got the same name as me. His first name is Michael after your father . . . and Andrew after me.

MOTHER

No, stop that, you hear?

BOY

Michael Andrew . . .

MOTHER

You never gave him no name . . . his name is Brown . . . Brown. The same as mine . . . and my sister's . . . and my daddy . . . You never gave him nothin' . . . and you're dead . . . go away and get buried.

BOY

You know that trouble I'm in . . . I got a wife down there, Bernie. I don't care about her . . . what could I do?

MOTHER

(Rises, pulling up the SON)

We're leavin' . . . don't you try and follow us . . . you hear, Andy? C'mon . . . Mikie . . . watch your step now.

BOY

Well . . . bring him around my job . . . you know where I work. That's all . . . bring him around on payday.

MOTHER

(Leaving)

We don't need anything from you . . . I'm working . . . just leave us alone.

(The BOY turns to the GIRL)

BOY

(Shrugs)

That's the way it goes . . . I guess. Ships passing on the trolley car . . . Hey . . . don't I know you from up around 40th and Market?

(The GIRL turns away)

SON

Yeah . . . I remember him. He always had liquor on his breath.

MOTHER

Yes . . . he did. I'm glad that stuff ain't got me no more . . . Thank the Lord.

GIRL

(35 years old)

You want to pour me another drink, Michael?

BOY

(15 years old)

You drink too much, Mother.

GIRL

Not as much as some other people I know.

BOY

Well, me and the guys just get short snorts, Mother. But you really hide some port.

GIRL

Don't forget you talkin' to your mother. You gettin' more like your father every day.

BOY

Is that why you like me so much?

GIRL

(Grins drunkenly)

Oh, hush up now, boy . . . and pour me a drink.

BOY

There's enough here for me too.

GIRL

That's okay . . . when Will comes in he'll bring something.

SON

How is Will, Mother?

MOTHER

I don't know . . . haven't seen Will in years.

SON

Mother.

MOTHER

Yes, Michael.

SON

Why you and Will never got married? . . . You stayed together for over ten years.

MOTHER

Oh, don't ask me questions like that, Michael.

SON

But why not?

MOTHER

It's just none of your business.

SON

But you could be married now . . . not alone in this room . . .

MOTHER

Will had a wife and child in Chester . . . you know that.

SON

He could have gotten a divorce, Mother . . . Why . . .

MOTHER

Because he just didn't . . . that's why.

SON

You never hear from him?

MOTHER

Last I heard . . . Will had cancer.

SON

Oh, he did.

MOTHER

Yes.

SON

Why didn't you tell me? . . . You could have written.

MOTHER

Why?

SON

So I could have known.

MOTHER

So you could have known? Why?

SON

Because Will was like a father to me . . . the only one I've really known.

MOTHER

A father? And you chased him away as soon as you got big enough.

SON

Don't say that, Mother.

MOTHER

You made me choose between you and Will.

SON

Mother.

MOTHER

The quarrels you had with him . . . the mean tricks you used to play . . . the lies you told to your friends about Will . . . He wasn't much . . . when I thought I had a sense of humor I us'ta call him just plain Will. But we was his family.

SON

Mother, listen.

MOTHER

And you drove him away . . . and he didn't lift a hand to stop you.

SON

Listen, Mother.

MOTHER

As soon as you were big enough you did all that you could to get me and Will separated.

SON

Listen.

MOTHER

All right, Michael . . . I'm listening.

(Pause)

SON

Nothing.

(Pause. Lifts an imaginary object)

Is this your tambourine?

MOTHER

Yes.

SON

Do you play it?

MOTHER

Yes.

SON

Well?

MOTHER

Everything I do in the service of the Lord I do as well as He allows.

SON

You play it at your meetings.

MOTHER

Yes, I do. We celebrate the life He has bestowed upon us.

SON

I guess that's where I get it from.

MOTHER

Did you say something, Michael?

SON

Yes. My musical ability.

MOTHER

Oh . . . you've begun taking your piano lessons again?

SON

No . . . I was never any good at that.

MOTHER

Yes, three different teachers and you never got past the tenth lesson.

SON

You have a good memory, Mother.

MOTHER

Sometimes, son. Sometimes.

SON

I play an electric guitar in a combo.

MOTHER

You do? That's nice.

SON

That's why I'm in New York. We got a good break and came East.

MOTHER

That's nice, Michael.

SON

I was thinking that Sunday I could rent a car and come down to get you and drive you up to see our show. You'll get back in plenty of time to rest for work Monday.

MOTHER

No, I'm sorry. I can't do that.

SON

But you would like it, Mother. We could have dinner up in Harlem, then go down and . . .

MOTHER

I don't do anything like that any more, Michael.

SON

You mean you wouldn't come to see me play even if I were appearing here in Philly?

MOTHER

That's right, Michael. I wouldn't come. I'm past all that.

SON

Oh, I see.

MOTHER

Yes, thank the Lord.

SON

But it's my life, Mother.

MOTHER

Good . . . then you have something to live for.

SON

Yes.

MOTHER

Well, you're a man now, Michael . . . I can no longer live it for you. Do the best with what you have.

SON

Yes . . . Yes, I will, Mother.

GIRL'S VOICE

(Offstage)

Sister Brown . . . Sister Brown . . . hello.

MOTHER

(Uneasy; peers at watch)

Oh . . . it's Mother Ellen . . . I didn't know it was so late.

GIRL

(Enters)

Sister Brown . . . how are you this evening?

MOTHER

Oh, just fine, Mother.

GIRL

Good. It's nearly time for dinner.

MOTHER

Oh, yes, I know.

GIRL

We don't want to keep the others waiting at meeting . . . do we?

MOTHER

No, we don't.

GIRL

(Self-assured)

Hello, son.

SON

Hello.

MOTHER

Oh, Mother . . . Mother . . .

GIRL

Yes, Sister Brown, what is it?

MOTHER

Mother . . . Mother . . . this is . . . this is . . .

(Pause)

. . . this is . . .

SON

Hello, I'm Michael. How are you?

MOTHER

(Relieved)

Yes, Mother . . This is Michael . . . my son.

GIRL

Why, hello, Michael. I've heard so much about you from your mother. She prays for you daily.

SON

(Embarrassed)

Oh . . . good.

GIRL

(Briskly)

Well . . . I have to be off to see about the others.

MOTHER

Yes, Mother Ellen.

GIRL

(As she exits; chuckles)

Have to tell everyone that you won't be keeping us waiting, Bernice.

(Silence)

SON

Well, I guess I better be going, Mother.

MOTHER

Yes.

SON

I'll write.

MOTHER

Please do.

SON

I will.

MOTHER

You're looking well . . . Thank the Lord.

SON

Thank you, so are you, Mother.

(He moves toward her and hesitates)

MOTHER

You're so much like your aunt. Give her my best . . . won't you?

SON

Yes, I will, Mother.

MOTHER

Take care of yourself, son.

SON

Yes, Mother. I will.

(The SON exits. The MOTHER stands looking after him as the lights go slowly down to . . .)

BLACKNESS